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The Virtual Visitor Center
Breaking New Ground on the World Wide Web

When the Harpers Ferry Park Virtual Visitor Center was first posted on the World Wide Web—the graphical window into the Internet—we really weren't sure what to expect. We had done a considerable amount of homework during the spring of 1995, and talked to a lot of people. In the process, we learned a few basics about some of the opportunities and obstacles in cyberspace.

First, we knew access to the Web is relatively easy. Anyone with a computer, 14.4 baud or faster modem, Web browser such as Netscape, and an Internet account through a service provider or online service (CompuServe, America Online, The Microsoft Network, or Prodigy) has access to any page, anytime, anywhere on the World Wide Web. With communications giants AT&T and MCI readying their own Internet access services, we understood that the number of regular users—now estimated at between 7–10 million—will continue to grow.

We were particularly interested in the interactivity the Web provides between a home page and its virtual visitor. Users can click on links to view photographs, access specific information, or call up detailed maps. They can conduct search queries through online forms, or they can send email to selected park employees. We found that well-designed pages invite this interaction, giving visitors opportunities to learn and explore—ultimately making for a more memorable visit.

Even more attractive was the Web's capability to make up-to-date information immediately available. A virtual visitor can access late-breaking news about a closed trail, a special park event, or a new cooperating association publication. Web pages can be updated monthly, weekly, daily, or even hourly. Compare this with updating conventional media such as books, newsletters, site bulletins, or even CD-ROMs.

Web pages provide feedback on virtual visitation. Scripts can record the number of "hits," or clicks, on individual pages and images, providing valuable marketing information for park managers. You can learn which topics, images, or maps are attracting the most attention, and use this information to shape the content of your Web site—or even of an actual park program.

We were also warned about some of the Web's drawbacks. The explosion of "net surfers" in just the past six months has taxed the Internet's communications infrastructure. The bandwidth that carries all this electronic traffic from server to user can slow to a painstaking crawl during peak business hours. Cooperating associations trying to sell park publications are also faced with obstacles to online commerce—it's just too easy for hackers to intercept credit card numbers and other valuable customer information. Until security tools are improved and, more importantly, until customers are comfortable with online commerce, conducting business on the Web is a difficult proposition.

Finally, we learned a great deal about just how much it might cost parks to develop online material and "serve" it on the Web. The Harpers Ferry Park Virtual Visitor Center was created through a partnership which tapped the programming expertise of a park volunteer, the graphic design expertise of the Harpers Ferry Historical Association (the park's cooperating association), and the educational, cultural, and administrative resources of the National Park Service. The only itemized expense was $19.95 for the HTML Manual of Style, by Larry Aronson (HTML—Hypertext Markup Language—is the *lingua franca* of the Web). The Harpers Ferry Park Virtual Visitor Center is hosted by the National Park Service on their server in Denver at no direct cost to the park.

Other parks and associations we talked to have also found partners to help develop and host their Web content. Grand Canyon National Park has collaborated with the Grand Canyon Association and Northern Arizona University; Jefferson National Expansion Memorial is working

HARPERS FERRY
National Historical Park
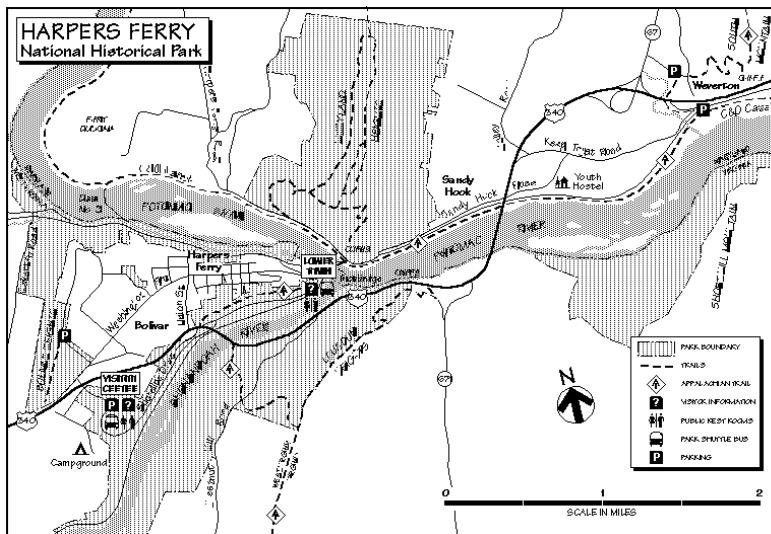
with Washington University of St. Louis; and Golden Gate National Recreation Area has partnered with Golden Gate National Park Association and community volunteers from the San Francisco Bay area.

So how has Harpers Ferry NHP fared in cyberspace? A few examples illustrate the dynamic impact the Web has had for us. A few days after our Virtual Visitor Center was posted on July 27, 1995, a ranger met a couple in the park from Washington, DC. They had in their hands a printout of our Virtual Visitor Center park map, Lower Town Trail Guide, and listing of local accommodations—all of which they had downloaded from the Internet. It turns out they had "surfed" to our Web site the previous evening, decided then and there to visit the park, then called one of the Bed & Breakfasts we list to make a reservation for the weekend. They came to the park both informed and enthused.

In the aftermath of the disastrous flood of January 20-21, 1996, the park was able to quickly post pictures and reports detailing the impact and extent of flooding in the Lower Town Historic District. Meteorologists with the NBC-TV affiliate in Washington, DC, directed viewers to our Virtual Visitor Center, generating more than 1,400 online visits in just seven days. Since the park was closed during this period, these numbers represent important visits by people who otherwise lacked direct access to park information, resources, and interpretive programs. And since email traffic to the park's public relations specialist indicated nationwide interest in the flood story, park managers decided to formally track daily "virtual visits" to the Harpers Ferry Park Virtual Visitor Center—the first national park in the country to do so.

A high school student visiting the park with her family just two weeks after the flood was drawn here as a direct consequence of our flood

reports on the World Wide Web. She had decided to do a classroom project on the Flood of 1996, and was visiting the park to see first-hand the flood's devastating impact. She lived just 30 miles away, and had never previously visited Harpers Ferry National Historical Park.

Our Virtual Visitor Center has generated email inquiries from senior citizens, elementary school teachers, college students, and Civil War scholars. Indeed, all of the Web's advertised benefits—widespread availability, inter-activity, and immediacy—have proven their worth. With a reasonable amount of skill, a modest financial commitment, and a certain degree of imagination, you can treat virtual visitors to an informative, entertaining, and memorable tour of your park. If they choose to actually visit your park, they will come better prepared and better educated. If they live in a distant place, then you've reached an audience you might have otherwise missed.

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